

George Vasey (1822–1893)

George Vasey was the USDA's first Chief Botanist, serving from 1872 until his death in 1893. His publications on the grasses of the United States are some of the most influential early work on the topic.

Vasey was born in England, and as a child he lived in New York State. He pursued botany as an enthusiastic amateur from a young age, but studied medicine as well and became a physician. A founding member of the [Illinois Natural History Survey](#), Vasey also served as the group's president and collections curator. After documenting flora for [John Wesley Powell's 1868 Colorado expedition](#), Vasey joined the USDA.¹

In the 1878 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture*, Vasey proposed that the true measure of the agricultural wealth of a region was the abundance of healthy meadows and pastureland.

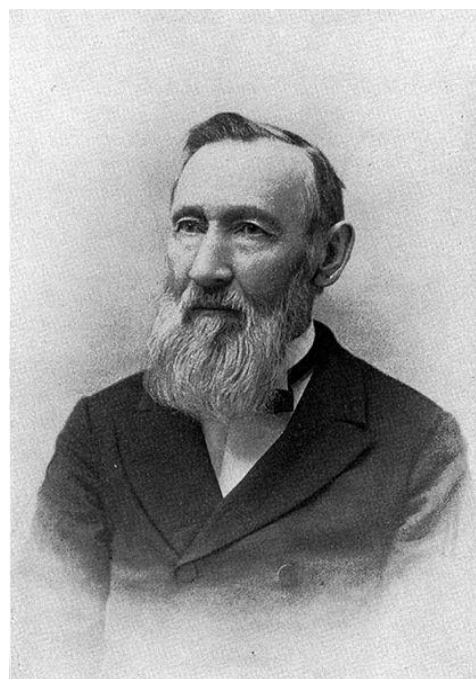
He also observed that “the difference of soil and climate in different portions of our extensive country are such as to require the cultivation of a large variety of grasses.”² With his USDA publications about grasses found in the United States and abroad, Vasey aimed to help farmers avoid agricultural methods that resulted in “impoverished land and too frequently an impoverished people.”³ These publications combine detailed botanical observations, useful illustrations, and practical observations on the use of grasses by farmers.

Vasey also served as curator of the [National Herbarium](#), and during his tenure the collection grew to include over 15,000 sheets of mounted grass specimens.⁴ He was instrumental in establishing the Grass Experimental Station at Garden City, Kansas.⁵

For more information on George Vasey:

William N. Canby and J. M. Rose. “George Vasey: A Biographical Sketch.” *Botanical Gazette*, Vol. 18, No. 5. (May, 1893), pp. 170-183. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2464581>

Frederick Vernon Coville. “Death of Dr. George Vasey.” *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (May 1893), pp. 218–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2477497>



George Vasey. Source: *Botanical Gazette*, Vol. 18, No. 5. (May, 1893)

Ed Collins. "Searching for Dr. Vasey." *Chicago Wilderness*, Winter 2001
http://www.chicagowilderness.org/CW_Archives/issues/winter2001/vasey.html

Archival Collections related to George Vasey:

Smithsonian Institution Archives – George Vasey Papers, 1889-1893 (SIA RU007087)
http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_217245

George Vasey's USDA contributions on the subject of grasses:

"Report of the Botanist and Chemist on Grasses and Forage Plants" by George Vasey and Peter Collier. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1878*. Pages 157-194 (plus 25 plates) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1879)

"Report of the Botanist on Grasses" by George Vasey. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1879*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880) Pages 349-359 (plus 27 plates).

"Report on the native and naturalized grasses" by George Vasey, Botanist. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1880*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1881) Pages 375-386 (plus 30 plates).

"Grasses for Texas" by George Vasey. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1881-1882*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1883) Pages 231-255 (plus 25 plates)

The grasses of the United States: being a synopsis of the tribes and genera, with descriptions of the genera, and a list of the species / Prepared by Dr. Geo. Vasey. (Washington : Govt. Print. Off., 1883)

The agricultural grasses of the United States, by Dr. George Vasey, also the chemical composition of American grasses, by Clifford Richardson. (Washington, D.C. : Government Printing Office, 1884)

A descriptive catalogue of the grasses of the United States, including especially the grass collections at the New Orleans exposition made by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, and the state exhibits of grasses, with notes on such species as are more or less employed in agriculture, or deserving or trial for cultivation. By Dr. George Vasey. (Washington, Gibson Bros., 1885)

Report of an investigation of the grasses of the arid districts of Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado / by George Vasey. (Washington, D.C. : Dept. of Agriculture, Botanical Division, 1886)

Grasses of the South : a report on certain grasses and forage plants for cultivation in the South and Southwest / by George Vasey. (Washington, D.C. : Dept. of Agriculture, Botanical Division, 1887)

Report of an investigation of the grasses of the arid districts of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, in 1887. (Washington : Government Printing Office, 1888)

The agricultural grasses and forage plants of the United States; and such foreign kinds as have been introduced. By Dr. Geo. Vasey; with an appendix on the chemical composition of grasses, by Clifford Richardson. Revised ed. (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1889)

Grasses of the Southwest : Plates and descriptions of the grasses of the desert region of western Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California / Geo. Vasey. (Washington : U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Division of Botany, 1891)

Grasses of the Pacific slope, including Alaska and the adjacent islands : Plates and descriptions of the grasses of California, Oregon, Washington, and the Northwestern Coast, including Alaska / Geo. Vasey. (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Division of Botany, 1893)

Illustrations of North American grasses / by Geo. Vasey, Botanist Department of Agriculture. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891-93.)

¹ Ed Collins. "Searching for Dr. Vasey." Colorado Wilderness, Winter 2001.

http://www.chicagowilderness.org/CW_Archives/issues/winter2001/vasey.html

² "Report of the Botanist and Chemist on Grasses and Forage Plants," *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1878*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), 157.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Philip J. Pauly. *Fruits and Plains: the horticultural transformation of America* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2007), 121.

⁵ Smithsonian Institution Archives - Summary, George Vasey Papers. (SIA RU007087)

http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_217245